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### Dissertation on moral influence in the treatment of disease

William Woodbridge  
*Yale University.*

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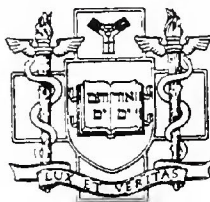




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*Dissertations*  
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at the  
Annual Examination,  
in the  
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~~XXII.~~

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Dissertation  
on  
Moral Influence in the treatment  
of Disease.

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By  
William Woodbridge, B. A.  
of Hartford, Connecticut,  
Candidate for the Degree of Doctor in Medicine.

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On the Importance of Moral Influences in the treatment of disease.

I do not commence this dissertation with any sanguine hopes of saying anything that is new, but my object will be attained by speaking, if not the whole truth, at least nothing but the truth. For I am conscious that one who has but just completed the studies preparatory to the profession of medicine, can speak with little confidence of things which he has as yet seen only "through a glass, darkly;" reflected from books, and lectures, and the other means of obtaining the light which may guide him as he first sets forth on his toilsome pilgrimage. Therefore I hope for indulgence if all that I may say, should not be in accordance with experience.

The connexion of the mind with the body, and the powerful influence which they exert upon each other in health, and especially in disease, have never escaped the notice of those who have made the phenomena of life and death their study. Ever since the event which "brought death into the world, and all our woe," man's body has never ceased to be swayed about by an infinite variety of mental influences, some affecting it for good, and others for evil. This has been the experience of every one; a fact whose truth is forced upon the attention from day to day, and which cannot but be noticed by



the least observing mind. It might be interesting, was it not foreign to our present purpose, to inquire whether many of the diseases with which man is at present afflicted, did not originate in the mind. To Adam in his state of innocence, the depressing passions were unknown. There was nothing in the wide universe for him to fear; perfect happiness left no room for grief; and no dark passions or corroding cares cast a gloom over his mind. But his unfortunate offspring became exposed to all these unhappy influences; and it may not be wholly absurd to suppose that these influences were the exciting causes of diseases which before had never been provoked to action.

In the early history of medicine, we find that the influence of the mind upon the body was known and turned to good account in the cure of diseases. Superstition for once was found useful. The temple of Esculapius was frequented by the sick in search of health, which they considered themselves certain of finding there, and which, therefore, many of them did find. It was in this temple, I believe, that every one who was thus restored to health deposited a model of the part which was diseased, in token of gratitude for the cure. This is the first approach to an anatomical museum of which we have any account. We find, indeed, that more importance was attached to supernatural powers in the cure of diseases, than to other remedies,

and that the method thus considered the best, consisted almost entirely in acting on the body through the mind. It was certainly much easier to pronounce over the patient certain incantations and spells, than to administer skilfully more tangible remedies. The homoeopathic practitioners at the present day seem to have approached this method of cure. At least they have almost discontinued the use of visible means, and we must suppose that they rely principally on some more ethereal power, as for instance the happy credulity, (may I not say superstition?) of their patients.

It will be unnecessary for me to pursue in detail the proof that this great fact of which I have been speaking, has been known to mankind in all countries and in all ages. We meet with continual allusions to it in many of the writings, both sacred and profane, which have come down to us, and no physiological fact seems to have been better known.

The different states in which the mind is placed, producing various effects on the body, may be divided into two kinds. viz., those states which arise from influences external both to the mind and to the body, and those which are produced by certain conditions of the body, acting on the mind, and this again reacting on the body. Of the first species we have numerous illustrations. Violent passions

or emotions will often produce wonderful effects in the case of diseases. Dr. Abercrombie in his work on the intellectual powers mentions the case of a naval officer who for some months had been confined to his cabin, and unable to move from a violent attack of gout. The vessel in which he sailed took fire, and the men being brought to him, in a few minutes he was upon deck, and the most active man in the ship. A case is recorded of a paralytic man who recovered the use of his limbs during a violent paroxysm of anger. The imagination will often produce the specific effects of certain medicines. Persons have been put to sleep by imaginary (not homoeopathic) doses of opium, and others have been deliriated by bread pills; and, in short, this noble faculty of the mind has, at various times, condescended to perform the office of a purge, an emetic, a narcotic, and a diuretic. I remember a curious case which I had upon the authority of a physician who was witness to the facts. A lady in the West-Indies, being somewhat hypochondriac, fancied that she had the "liver complaint," and insisted that her medical attendant should put her upon a course of mercury. He refused to do this, as he believed that she was affected by no such disease. However, she persisted, and told him that if he would not prescribe the mercury, she would find some



other persons who would be more accommodating. He then directed her to send to his house for some pills which he would prepare. They were prepared, and he took good care to put nothing into them stronger than bread. The patient commenced taking them, and the physicians, calling two or three days afterwards, found that her gums were tender, and a day or two after that, he saw the satisfaction of seeing her sitting with a large wash-bowl before her, spitting most energetically.

The cases I have given may serve to illustrate my first point, and in addition I will merely say that all the passions of the mind may be produced by causes external to the mind and body, and that each produces its peculiar effect, by whatever means it may be excited. — I will now consider briefly those conditions of the body which produce certain states of the mind, which again reacts on the body. Most diseases produce an effect of some kind upon the mind, these effects varying much in different diseases. Patients with affections of the lungs, and this is true especially of those laboring under phthisis pulmonalis) are usually cheerful and broog up by hope till the last, while persons with disease of the stomach & intestines are depressed in spirits, and sometimes are even reduced to despair. Dyspepsia occasionally produces monomania

of a whimsical kind. The vagaries of hypochondriacal patients have furnished abundant food for merriment to every one but the sufferers themselves. Persons affected in this manner seem at once to adopt a belief in the transmigration of bodies, and imagine themselves to be converted into various substances and forms. One supposes himself to be made of glass, and is very fearful of breaking. Another is converted into a clock, to which he bears no other resemblance than in having hands and a face. Pope has described these extravagancies with much humor.

"Unnumber'd thoughts on every side are seen  
Bodies chang'd to various forms by spleen.  
Here living fear-jobs stand, one arm hid out,  
One bent, the handle this, and that the point.  
A Dipkin thus like Homer's triped, walks;  
Here Licks a jar and there a goose-pie talks.  
Men prove with child as powerful fancy works,  
And maids, turn'd bottles, are abroad for corks."

This disease is apt to prove very obstinate for the patient has everything against him. First the disease itself from its nature has a depressing influence on the mind, and then the mind of course acts unfavorably upon the body, so that there is comparatively little chance of recovery until the patient's mind is diverted from the contemplation of his ailments, and subjected to more happy influences.

On the other hand, pulmonary consumption leads along its unwary

victim with such a deceptive slowness, that he can seldom be persuaded of his danger till he sees the grave opening beneath his feet. There are no imaginary phantoms to harass the mind; no gloomy fancies to darken the prospect; but pleasing visions of returning health gladden the heart, and fill the mind with hope. Certainly, in this disease, the powers of nature have the influence of the mind to aid them in restoring the disordered functions of the body. It would seem as if nature, feeling her own weakness, had pressed this ally into her service to withstand the attacks of the mighty enemy. —

Disorders of the nervous system produce a derangement of the mind, and are often very obstinate on this account. I suppose it to be a general fact, that diseases have a more or less depressing influence on the mind according to the degree in which they affect the alimentary canal. The diseases of which I have just spoken, (dyspepsia and consumption,) may perhaps be considered as the two extremes, between which there are many intermediate degrees. — The influence of Temperament on the state of the mind in disease is great, and worthy of an extended consideration. Similar causes, operating on persons of different temperaments, will produce very dissimilar effects. For instance, an occurrence, suppose a reverse



of fortune which will almost drive one person to despair, may produce in another a comparatively slight and transient depression and the cause of this difference may be found in their different temperaments. Persons in whom the bilious temperament predominates, are naturally of a grave character, and are more subject to diseases of the alimentary canal while those in whom the sanguine temperament is the most powerful, are liable to disorders of the vascular and respiratory systems. These principles are very general, and will doubtless admit of many exceptions; but in medicine more than in any other science, the exceptions to general rules are numerous, and if the saying be true, that "the exception proves the rule," then many principles in medicine are certainly very fully proved.

The physician who forgets that his patient has a mind as well as a body, and treats him as he would a mere animal in similar circumstances, will sometimes find his remedies unaccountably fail in their object, and will look in every direction but the right one for the cause of the failure, and till he discovers the truth of the matter will frequently meet with similar disappointments. On the other hand; he, who, seeing the whole truth, observes disease in its two-fold aspect, will be doubly armed; for directing

his attention to the mind as well as to the body... he can often make the former subservient to his purposes. The mind is a good servant, but a bad master in sickness; and if the physician can make it his servant, the battle will be nearly won. But in order to this, he must have a thorough knowledge of the workings of the mind; he must know by what external signs its condition is manifested, what motives will produce the desired influence upon it, and what kind of influence in a given case, is required. This knowledge, however, cannot be gained from books, but is the result of experience and observation only. No man ever increased his practical knowledge of human nature by reading solely. Close observation, and the power of reasoning correctly, (and I may add, readily,) from facts, will give in this as well as in other things, a facility in applying general truths to particular cases; and this constitutes the strength of the Scientific Physician.

It seems then, that one who should attempt to cure bodily disease without considering the powerful influence which the mind often has upon it, overlooks an element in his problem which cannot be omitted without bringing him

to an incorrect conclusion. For let one consider the various and continually changing states into which the mind is thrown by the passions and feelings which act upon it; how it is elevated by joy and hope, or depressed by grief and despair; how dependent it is, in respect to its comfort, upon influences which continually surround it; and then let the intimate connexion of the mind with the body be considered, how all these different states of the mind have their effect upon the body, weakening the power of disease, or uniting with it to aid in the work of destruction; let any one reflect on all this, and he will feel that medicines are to be applied to the mind as well as to the body, and that there should be a moral as well as a physical Materia Medica.

William Woodbridge.







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